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AUTHOR Woods, William F.
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ABSTRACT

One of the most useful models of the composing process is that derived from an interpretation of the rhetorical triangle. This basic model implies the relationships between the writer's subject, background, and audience, but it also points to the specific writing functions that underlie these terms. For example, in conceiving a subject, the writer discovers the ideas, images, and insights that will be used in the essay; the writer's background and motives suggest approaches to these subjects; and the writer's relationship to the intended readers allows the creation of a voice or "role" that aids in shaping the essay. Interpreted in this way, the rhetorical triangle provides a conceptual frame for planning an essay and, in this important sense, is a "direction finder," orienting students toward their goals as writers. (Author/AA)

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William F. Woods
Department of English
Wichita State University
Wichita, Kansas 67208

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THE RHETORICAL TRIANGLE AS DIRECTION FINDER IN THE COMPOSING PROCESS

One of the hardest tasks a writing teacher has is putting himself in the student's place, trying to see the obstacles as he sees them and then suggesting ways of organizing, revising, clarifying. Editors have this ability -- one thinks of Max Perkins coaching Thomas Wolfe -- and teachers of writing, if they want to advance past the comma chasing stage, must develop it. But I don't mean to imply that copy-reading manuscripts is the key to teaching writing. The real difficulty of being a teacher-editor is that it requires some understanding of the composing process, as well as the ability to define problems, to know good prose from bad, and to empathize with struggling writers. In order to give the best practical assistance, we need to know as specifically as possible how writers conceive of their subjects, how they correlate that conception with their own knowledge and experience, and finally how they shape their response into a statement for a particular audience.

Of course describing the composing process involves obstacles of its own. Writing is finally a mental process, so that our descriptions of it have to be made at second-hand. They are approximations, or better yet, paradigms of what actually happens when someone writes. Consequently, we turn our efforts to finding adequate models of the writing process -- models which provide a comprehensive view of the functions involved and suggest the kinds of specific operations which underlie them. For teachers of writing, a most useful basic model is what we call the communications triangle, or rhetorical triangle, a diagram of the relationships between subject, speaker and audience

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in any communicative act. In isolation these three terms constitute a theory of communication derived from Aristotle's idea of the three modes of appeal in discourse, the logical (logos - subject), the ethical (ethos - speaker), and the pathetic (pathos - audience). When this theory is applied to a particular field (e.g. composing, literary criticism), its interpretation produces a frame for the analysis of discourse within that field.[1]

Thus, by interpreting the relationships between subject, writer and audience we can arrive at a description of the composing process. This description is comprehensive -- it points to relationships which are active considerations throughout the writing process -- but it also directs us to those specific operations and choices that become necessary as the writer confronts his subject, relates it to his own background, and presents it to his audience. Of course the theory does not imply a sequence for these operations. Yet writing about the composing process forces us to treat it as linear, and furthermore, my interpretation of the relationships between the writer's subject, his background and his audience has led me to consider them in that order. Indeed, I would argue that imposing this sequence on the terms of the rhetorical triangle is precisely what makes it a "direction finder" for students, helping them adjust to their subject and audience and providing them with an "inner orientation" toward their goals for a particular essay.

The first part of the composing process, it seems to me, concerns the writer's subject: his anchor for the essay. By themselves, without the constraints imposed by an appropriate subject, vivid impressions and strong feelings are pointless. Writing teachers forget this at their peril: the waning of the "personal writing" movement in the

early 1970's was probably caused by its failure to go beyond its concern with the writer's immediate personal experience. Those who opened the mines of the "examined life" neglected to say how those riches were to be spent. Teachers during those years were aware that outside the composition greenhouse, the personal voice often wilted or grew rank, but they usually saw the problem as a conflict between the rich, spontaneous "personal" writing students produced in their sketches, and the terrible stuff (Macrorie called it Engfish) that they more often produced in academic writing assignments such as term papers and reports. Under fire from the practical minded, especially in the city colleges, the personal voice movement gradually sank beneath a new wave of old-style rhetorics and other back-to-the-basics materials. But in retrospect, it seems as if the weakness of the spontaneous writing methods was not a failure to teach grammar principles and essay formats. The real problem was that no one tried to show students how to write effectively about a variety of subject matters, how to avoid that false dichotomy between their "personal experience" and their so-called "formal education," which so seldom found its way into their composition course journals.

How does the writer respond to his subject, then? The traditional description of the way we discover our subject is Aristotle's system of topics, particularly his "common" topics -- a series of basic questions designed to be used in exploring any subject. The topic of comparison, for example, helps us to inquire about degrees of similarity and difference. Such questions are so familiar a part of our mental equipment that they seem to represent thought itself, and indeed, Frank D'Angelo has said that "the topics...can be viewed as differentiations of basic mental processes that have developed over

thousands of years."[2] The topics, then, can serve as cues for the mental acts which allow us to learn, understand and evaluate information of all kinds; they are like a practical index to our fundamental analytical skills.

Through these topics, and through other kinds of heuristic questions devised by modern rhetoricians, teachers of writing can provide students with a workable, systematic means of developing their grasp of a subject. Yet we should also recognize that heuristic questions can only lead to ideas, images and insights. It is only when the writer finds his own way of "seeing" the subject, that the composing process really begins. For our individual understanding of the world -- and our basis for writing about it -- is gained through "concepts," configurations of ideas which include the basic analytic processes associated with the topics, but include as well a great many other images, ideas, and fragments of ideas that are individually determined and vary with the writer's experience. In general, concepts function as mediators between our experience (past and present) and the new subject matter which concerns us; more precisely, concepts are "cognitive organizing systems which serve to bring pertinent features of past experience to bear on a present stimulus object."[3] Thus any concept, any mental construct may function as a mediator to help organize our perception of the world and to make sense of it.

If we want to know about the writer's personal relationship to his subject, therefore, we have to consider how his conceptual activity shapes his outlook on the world. Of course it is not always possible to distinguish between a concept and the material it informs, or "organizes." Suppose, for instance, we notice a house. We do not consciously apply the concept "house" to the perceived object (at

least, not usually); we merely see that house as an example of our concept of a house. Concept and object are united, that is, in the process of perception, so that it is difficult to get "outside," or be apart from our concepts, except by adopting other ones. But this difficulty aside, knowing in general how concepts function can help us understand how a writer "invents," or discovers the subject of his essay. This process begins with the writer's awareness of his subject, whether it is his own choice, or a "received" subject coming to him from another source. Asked to write about the demolition of Victorian houses in the interest of urban renewal, for example, the writer may realize that he is bothered by the loss of old houses, even though he likes the idea of rebuilding the city. Perhaps he will define the problem as a relationship between zoning and traffic control, and the vitality of residential neighborhoods. Then, as he begins to explore this problem from various angles, he can bring to bear his heuristic questions, which will in turn suggest further associations and relationships -- i.e. concepts -- that arise out of his own experience, and that will determine what he actually writes about urban renewal. Notice that it is ultimately these conceptual mediating processes -- the memories of other old neighborhoods, sentiments about old buildings, vivid half-remembered events, and an awareness of the contrast between old and new neighborhoods -- which are the writer's true response to his subject, and constitute the fund of material he can draw from in writing the essay.

Having considered the writer's relationship to his subject, we can now turn to the middle point of the rhetorical triangle, which represents the writer himself. In a sense, the writer's "self" has the position of middleman in the writing process; we can imagine him

standing at the vantage point between where his subject converges in a problem and is assimilated to a series of concepts, and where it diverges again in images and tropes that are shaped by the writer's awareness of his audience. But is it possible to distinguish the writer's background of values, biases and ingrained ideas or judgments from his conceptual skills? The difference is a subjective one, but it is real. Concepts provide us with a way of perceiving a subject, and thereby understanding it, but our memory or "background" retains the network of assumptions, habits, values and vices that define us as individuals and allow us to interact with others. Concepts enable us to have styles of learning; but our backgrounds give us our individuality, our motives, and our fundamental sense of purpose.

It is easier to discuss background by trying to account for its sources in our past behavior, and Kenneth Burke's treatment of "orientation" is helpful in this regard. Like Pavlov's animals, Burke says, we humans are conditioned to desire some things and avoid or fear others, and we <u>characterize</u> such expectations by linking the outstanding, or representative features of remembered events. That is, we reduce such memories to symbols, and then gradually we accumulate and link these symbols to form a reference field which Burke calls "orientation" -- "a bundle of judgments" about the way things are.[4] Our orientation, in other words, is our background.

But so far I have said nothing about background that could not apply to the family dog. Our distinctively human act is to <u>verbalize</u> our entire field of orientation, rendering it into linguistic symbols, and thereby giving it a complexity of association different from that of dogs, both in degree and perhaps kind. This verbalizing process, as Burke says, requires reasoning, and thus a consideration of the

motives which we assign for our actions. We feel that if we know why people act as they do, we will know what to expect of them; therefore, as we plan our lives, we construct a system, or "grammar" of motives to explain and predict others' acts, as well as our own.[5] Once formed, these motives for action may be called up from memory by certain kinds of situations, or more precisely, by certain patterns of "discrepant and conflicting stimuli that represent the subject," as Burke says.[6] Thus for Burke, "motives are shorthand terms for situations"; when we act from the motive of "upholding justice," let's say, we do not consider the problems with a fresh understanding, but are drawing on past judgments about problems of similar nature. To encounter a problem, then, is to test this problem against our orientation, which in turn suggests a motive for action that seems reasonable because it derives from a complex of judgments about similar conflicts.

For the teacher of writing, this way of talking about background is helpful because it objectifies and makes legitimate the writer's dependence on his personal experience. It is true that part of what we call background is in fact subconscious material that makes its way to the surface in ways hard to recognize. However, much of our experience does remain with us as conscious memory, and we make things unnecessarily hard for ourselves if we romanticize this available "orientation" by mislabelling it sensitivity, intuition, talent, and so on. These qualities do exist in relationship to a writer's background, but are not prior conditions for its existence. To speak of background is simply to talk about the way a person lives his life -- the kinds of decisions he makes, or avoids making, and the patterns of his activities. Some lives, obviously, are richer, better ordered and more satisfying than others. But clearly, the writer's own life,

his own background, is all he's got, and it behooves him to make the most of it.

Having conceived his subject and formed a motive toward it, the writer is prepared to think about his audience. Readers in their natural state tend to be passive creatures, and since few subjects automatically inspire wonder and delight, it is important to consider not only what subjects the reader will tolerate, but also how he "hears" them, and from whom. Here is where the "voice" of the writer takes effect, and this voice can best be described as a function of the "role" or "persona" which the writer adopts for the purpose of the essay.[7] To a large extent, the writer's role arises from his motive toward the subject. If he is reviewing a movie which he admires on aesthetic or perhaps moral grounds (his motive), he may adopt the role of someone sharing a pleasant story with his friends. Notice that this choice of role determines not only the tone of the essay (e.g. choice of lexical items and phrase patterns) but also to some extent the selection of material: the writer is more apt to present those parts of the movie which most readers in this particular audience can approve easily. Even the structure of the essay is affected by the writer's role. A sympathetic treatment of a movie, for example, relegates any adverse comments to the body of the work, where they add credibility to the treatment but will not make a dominant impression.

One source of the writer's role, then, is the relationship between his motive and his sense of the audience. But the subject itself has a direct influence on the writer's persona, because certain kinds of material require special treatment. For example, the historian's task is to illuminate his material by pointing out implicit relationships such as cause and effect, or parallel sequences of events, and

so his role becomes something like that of a helpful guide. On the other hand, if a writer of religious tracts is describing the fallen state of modern society, his role may be more like that of a prophet; this sort of "prophetic voice" is observable in certain kinds of letters to the editor in the newspapers.

What are some of the other varieties of roles? For convenience we can divide them into three groups, even though in practice, roles are never "pure," but contain various proportions of mixed features. Some roles are primarily concerned with purveying information (historian; producer of documentary material; popularizer; journalist). Then there are roles concerned with evaluating the subject from various points of view (critics of all kinds; prophets; moralists; apologists; editorializers). And finally, there are roles concerned with manipulating the subject matter for an ulterior purpose (humorists; propagandists; satirists; self-aggrandizers). Not all of these are common roles, and some of them, such as the propagandist and the self-aggrandizer (boasters of all kinds) are generally considered undesirable. It is an advantage to the reader, nevertheless, to be able to distinguish authorial roles, because they point toward the author's motives, and consequently his strategies for selection and emphasis of subject matter. Student writers should also be aware of these roles. Most students, because of their personality traits and their choices of subject matter, form the habit of using one or two congenial roles that help them write forcefully. A teacher can help the student extend his range by making him aware of the roles he already uses, by suggesting other roles he could use effectively, and by working within the writer's manuscripts to bring out these roles with greater clarity and power.

As we have seen, then, an interpretation of the rhetorical triangle can serve as a basis for describing the composing process -- what writers go through as they conceive a subject, relate it to their own background, and shape it for presentation to a reader. This description is not a research plan or a model for problem solving, but rather an overview that imposes a sequence on the writing process, and offers us a way of thinking about its major functions, especially the writer-subject relationship that some have called "pre-writing."[8] For while the best available discussions of pre-writing concentrate mainly on techniques for helping students integrate a subject into their own experiential reality, this interpretation considers not only the writer's own experience, but also his prior judgments about it, and his plans for relating it to the expectations of the reader. Thus, although the rhetorical triangle has its own limits as a direction finder, it provides the student with a conceptual frame for planning an essay, and in this important sense, it orients him toward his goals as a writer.

NOTES

[1] James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 20.

[2] Frank D'Angelo, "An Ontological Basis for a Modern Theory of the Composing Process" (Unpublished paper given at CCC Conference, 1977), 11.

[3] W. Edgar Vinake, The Psychology of Thinking, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 106.

[4] Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change, 2nd rev. ed. (Los Altos, Cal.: Hermes Publications, 1954), p. 14.

[5] Ibid., p. 18.

[6] Ibid., p. 30.

[7] For an extended discussion of role, see Walker Gibson, Tough, Sweet and Stuffy (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1966) and _____, Persona: A Style Study for Readers and Writers (New York: Random House, 1969).

[8] See D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke, Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing, Michigan State University Cooperative Research Project No. 2174 (1964).